

Gustavus joins the Homer Multitext Project

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Cycladic bard from Keros, c. 2700-2300 BC, National Archaeological Museum, Athens

Sing, goddess, the wrath of Achilles

When the song was first sung is no longer known. It happened many centuries before writing was invented. Indeed certain words can be traced back to the second millennium BC, the period that the Greeks called the age of heroes. The song spread. Time and again, it was performed to rapt audiences up and down the Aegean. Drawing on their experience of past performances and on the traditional language and meter of epic poetry, singers composed the song in performance. Like snowflakes, no two performances were exactly the same. The song grew until it was thousands of verses long. In every sense, this was a great work, inspired by the Muses.

Later generations came to enshrine it, regarding it as an heirloom to be preserved. At Athens its performance was the highlight of the Panathenaia, the city's main festival. In school, young boys learned it by heart. Alexander the Great carried a written copy of it with him as his most prized possession, all the way to the shores of the Indus; he made a point to pass by Troy and lay a crown on the tomb of Achilles.

Early scholarship at the library of Alexander

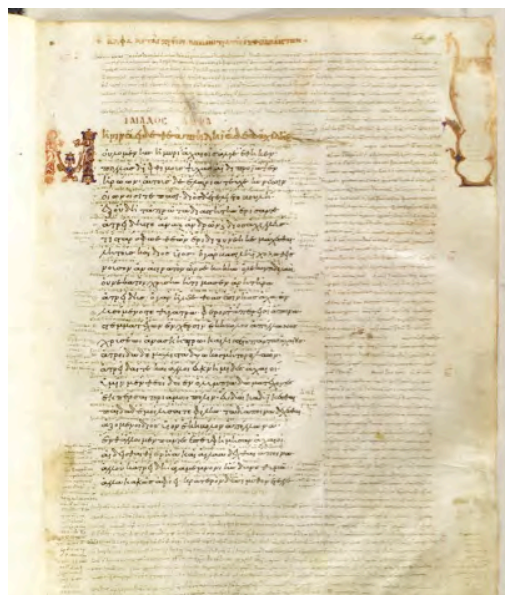
If our age has been transformed by the computer, the age of Alexander was revolutionized by the book. Within a century of his death, a city that Alexander founded on the Egyptian coast gave rise to the most famous library of all time. It sent out agents to obtain exemplars of every text they could find; these were then copied by hand in what was an early version of the modern interlibrary loan system. Scholars from all over the Greek-speaking world gathered there to consult its unparalleled collection of papyrus rolls and participate in what we now call academic research in the so-called Museum or home of the Muses, a library and research center rolled into one.

But one work dominated their attention above all others. That work was the *Iliad*. The most famous scholars at Alexandria studied this poem with the intensity with which Reformation theologians such as Luther and Calvin studied the Bible. Indeed, the history of scholarship as we know it is inextricably linked to the study of the *Iliad*—and, to a lesser degree, the *Odyssey*—at Alexandria. Take Zenodotus of Ephesus, for example, the first director of the library. As well as developing the first library classification system (arranged alphabetically by author), he wrote a lexicon of unusual words in Homer, and divided the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into twenty-four books, one for each letter of the Greek alphabet. He also produced the first critical edition of these poems, which involved comparing different manuscripts and selecting what he judged was the best version in places where the texts differed, adding his explanations in notes in the margins called marginalia.

This process of textual criticism was taken to a whole new level by Aristarchus of Samothrace, who directed the library in the 2nd century BC. Aristarchus wrote his commentaries on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on separate rolls from the texts, allowing for more extensive comments than Zenodotus' marginalia. In order for his reader to more easily link lines in the text roll to the accompanying note in the commentary roll, Aristarchus further developed a system of signs (begun by Zenodotus and Aristophanes of Byzantium) in the margins of the text roll, the forerunner of modern citation methods such as the footnote, endnote, or asterisk. In fact, the asterisk was one of the signs that he used! The note in the commentary roll began with a lemma, the citation of the word or phrase from the text on which it would comment; this, too, is a common practice to this day!

The great library at Alexandria was destroyed by fire, though no consensus exists as to when exactly this happened. With it, many texts were lost for ever; others were lost in the centuries that followed. Thankfully, the *Iliad* was preserved through the diligence of scribes who copied and recopied its text and the accompanying scholia, which contained excerpts from the scholarly comments of Zenodotus, Aristarchus and other Hellenistic scholars. Thus we can continue to enjoy one of the oldest and most enduring stories of all time, as well as some of the first examples of secondary scholarship!

A Byzantine manuscript saved by a Renaissance humanist



Opening lines of the *Iliad* on folio 12r of the Venetus A manuscript; text of the poem surrounded by scholia.

The oldest surviving complete manuscript of Homer's *Iliad* is the Venetus A, a 10th century medieval manuscript that was produced during the 10th century in Constantinople, also known as Byzantium, a city which continued to flourish as a center of learning long after the fall of the Roman empire in the west. Five centuries after its creation, this deluxe manuscript came into the possession of Basileios Bessarion, a Byzantine scholar and cleric who settled in Italy after having been sent there by Byzantine



Emperor John VIII Paleologus in a failed attempt to negotiate the unification of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. Bessarion went on to become a leading Renaissance scholar and patron of humanistic learning, whose mission to preserve and disseminate works of Greek literature took on greater urgency after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. In 1468 he donated his library to the Venetian Republic; it now forms part of the Marciana library, located in St. Mark's square at the heart of Venice.

The Homer Multitext Summer 2013 Seminar at the Center for Hellenic Studies

This June, two Gustavus students (Laurel Boman '14 and Karl Grant '14) and I joined twenty other classicists at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington D.C. There we spent two weeks working with the Venetus A manuscript. Until recently, what we were doing would not have been possible, as the manuscript is fragile and kept under lock and key, accessible only by special permission. But everything changed in 2007, when a digital facsimile of this and two other important *Iliad* manuscripts was commissioned by the Center for Hellenic Studies of Harvard University as part of the [Homer Multitext Project](#), spearheaded by Professors Christopher Blackwell, Casey Dué, Mary

Ebbott and Neel Smith. Now this online digital edition allows unprecedented access to these manuscripts in glorious high resolution. What is more, the Homer Multitext Project is creating the first comprehensive edition of these manuscripts, providing a transcription of the text and



Laurel Boman (Gustavus Adolphus College, left) and Leonie Henkes (Leiden University, right) work on folio 132r of the Venetus A



Megan Truax (University of Houston, left), Beni Ransom (University of Washington, center), and Karl Grant (Gustavus Adolphus College, right) enjoy working together as a research team

[Mythological Geography](#) (posted June 28, 2013) written by Stephanie Lindeborg, an undergraduate at the College of the Holy Cross.

scholia (accompanying commentary) that is fully searchable. So readers will not need to be able to decipher the handwriting of the scribe (a study known as paleography) to be able to read the text, a task that is further complicated by the unfamiliar letter forms, ligatures (combined letters), abbreviations, and technical terms of ancient scholarship. And they will be able to make new discoveries and pose new questions about the text, its

ancient commentary, and the manuscript. For one interesting example, read the blog article titled [Iliad 8 Scholia on](#)

A large-scale collaborative venture such as the Homer Multitext Project is still unusual in the humanities: participants in this summer's seminar represented eight institutions and came from as far away as Holland. Such collaboration is central to the philosophy of the project's editors, who have also co-authored several books with each other. More remarkable still, most of the seminar participants were undergraduates. Working in teams



Laurel Boman (Gustavus Adolphus College, right) and Leonie Henkes (Leiden University, left) at work in the Center for Hellenic Studies library

of three, they transcribed and studied their assigned folios (individual pages of the manuscript) from *Iliad* book 10, and recorded the text and scholia in XML mark-up language that will allow the data to be presented in a variety of forms and to be fully machine-searchable. As they did so, the teams made a number of interesting discoveries, some of which they formally presented on the last day of the seminar. If your notion of undergraduate research conjures up visions of rehashed Wikipedia entries, reading the blog write-up of one group's presentation by Michiel Cock (Leiden University), Dillon Gisch (University of Washington 2012) and Christopher Rivera (University of Houston 2013) titled [*Aural Confusion in the Venetus A Scholia?*](#) (posted July 26, 2013) should change this perception.

One major consequence of the project's design is that it restores context to the study of Homeric epic. Most classicists study the *Iliad* out of a textbook that offers only one version of every verse; this version has been chosen by the editor, often from many variants present in the



Eric Dugdale (left) and Karl Grant (both from Gustavus Adolphus College) converse at the Center for Hellenic Studies

manuscripts. Other forms, where included, are relegated to the fine-print at the bottom of the page, in what is known as the *apparatus criticus*, which is often written in Latin to further complicate matters. Gone is the context that helps us understand the story of the poem's transmission. Gone is the wealth of information included in the scholia by ancient scholars who went to remarkable lengths to preserve the multi-forms that lie at the heart of a poem that was born out of oral performance. To privilege one version of a poem

whose essence is multiform is as restrictive as allowing musicologists access to only one jazz version of *What a Wonderful World* or ethnologists only one version of a folktale. This practice of selecting one preferred reading over other versions that are discounted as corrupt variants has remained largely unquestioned even among many Homerists.

The Homer Multitext Project hopes to change that. The XML architecture of the project means that every surviving multiform will be documented, and can be laid out just as appears in a given manuscript. Readers can verify the transcribed text against the online image of the folio. And they will be able to readily compare the readings found in multiple manuscripts. Just as important to its editors, the Homer Multitext is an open source project that can be used by anyone who has access to a computer.

I can't help noticing that those of us who participated in this summer's HMT seminar enjoyed an experience not unlike that of scholars at the library of Alexandria over two millennia ago. We came from far and wide to the Center for Hellenic Studies to work at a research center equipped with a great library.

There we found ourselves immersed in a dynamic, collaborative and interdisciplinary milieu. We learned from scholars with expertise in a variety of disciplines (linguistics, archaeology, philology, information systems) who are pioneering new ways to study the *Iliad*. Like their ancient forebears, these scholars are harnessing the power of the latest technologies to open new avenues of scholarship, and are developing strategies to effectively catalogue and cross-reference the wealth of



Center for Hellenic Studies, with deer grazing in the foreground

data that these technologies make available. Indeed, the mark-up language that the HMT project is applying to the study of Homer is a direct descendent of the earlier forms of metadata



Biblioteca Marciana, Piazza San Marco, Venice

(lemmata, critical signs, punctuation) that the scholars at Alexandria invented to facilitate the study of texts. The HMT project's architects have designed the project with a view to longevity: it is not tied to a particular platform, software, or hardware and so will not become obsolete as technology evolves. The project also extends the life-span of manuscripts such as the Venetus A, susceptible to damage every time they are handled and exposed to light, since fewer scholars will need to examine the manuscripts themselves now that such high-resolution images are available. Even if the Marciana Library were to

experience a fate as cataclysmic as that of its Alexandrian counterpart (μὴ γένοιτο), the digital avatars of three of its precious Byzantine manuscripts would live on, like the age-old song they celebrate.

For fascinating footage from Venice of the process of digitizing the manuscript, see the PBS documentary *A Digital Renaissance*, viewable on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri6X1Dz4Ycg>